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ABSTRACT

Horton Foote was among the television writers who helped make NBC's "Television Playhouse" the most popular live dramatic program on the air during the "Golden Age" of television drama, the period between 1952 and 1957. Foote felt a strong affinity for the land and people of his youth, and modeled the imaginary towns of Harrison and Bountiful after his hometown of Wharton, Texas. "The Trip to Bountiful," one of Foote's most characteristic teleplays, depicts the inner turmoil and deep motivations of common, ordinary people, and emphasizes characterization over plot. Carrie Watts, forced by economic necessity to live with her son and his bad-tempered, self-centered wife in a cramped downtown Houston apartment, decides to take off by herself on a bus to visit Bountiful, her country birthplace. Most of the story deals with the bus ride and the young girl in whom Carrie confides during the trip, and with her daughter-in-law and son's attempts to force Carrie to return to Houston with them. The television writing of Horton Foote--sometimes called a "Texas Chekhov"--can best be described as careful and sensitive exploration of the human mind and spirit. "The Trip to Bountiful," which marked a reversal of the reliance on successful Broadway plays as material for television, deals with that quality in people that spurs them on to an important goal, the attainment of which will satisfy an intense longing. (Notes and 23 references are included.) (NKA)

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In Search of Happier Times:
Horton Foote's The Trip to Bountiful

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In Search of Happier Times:

Horton Foote's The Trip to Bountiful

At the awards ceremony of the Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences held on March 24, 1986, Geraldine Page accepted her Oscar for Best Performance by an Actress in a Leading Role. That role was Mrs. Watts, and the film was The Trip to Bountiful. Ms. Page's acceptance speech was emotional, which is common; it was also brief, which is not. Yet, several times she expressed gratitude to a man whose name is not widely known outside of television and film circles. It was the name of a man who, more than thirty years earlier, had written the lines that Mrs. Watts would say to her confused and frustrated family. Ms. Page praised--and thanked--Horton Foote, the author of The Trip to Bountiful.

This paper will discuss live television drama of the early 1950's with special focus on Horton Foote's simple and perceptive teleplay, The Trip to Bountiful. It will look at the author, his original play, and its live performance on television in 1953. No attempt is made to compare the original teleplay with its modern film descendant, but only to provide a critical and historical context to assist today's filmgoer in assessing the merits of the story, and the impact of the characters.

Live Television Drama

Much has been written concerning the "Golden Age" of television drama, that luminous period from about 1952 to 1957 during which some of the most inspired and memorable short plays were written

and produced on live network television. Their names and authors are well-known: Requiem for a Heavyweight, Patterns, and Noon on Doomsday by Rod Serling; Marty, Bachelor Party, and The Mother by Paddy Chayefsky; Thunder on Sycamore Street and Twelve Angry Men by Reginald Rose; Visit to a Small Planet by Gore Vidal. The familiarity of these authors' names today is due both to the quality of their early television writing and to the fact that many of them received later recognition in other artistic endeavors, namely television series, novels, Broadway, and motion pictures. To a great many Americans today, Rod Serling means Twilight Zone or Night Gallery, Chayefsky's "claim to fame" is his screenplay for Network, and Gore Vidal was William Buckley's opponent in a hostile television discussion almost two decades ago.

The 1950's, of course, produced other fine television writers, less active or less conspicuous in later years than their aforementioned colleagues, but nonetheless well-known and well-respected in their time. These are the men who, along with Chayefsky, comprised Fred Coe's fine stable of writers, making NBC's Philco-Goodyear Television Playhouse the most popular live television dramatic program in its first four seasons on the air ("Grownups' Playhouse"). These writers include David Shaw (Native Dancer), N. Richard Nash (The Joker), Robert Alan Aurthur (Spring Reunion), Tad Mosel (The Lawn Party), and Horton Foote.

A "Texas Chekhov"

Horton Foote was born on March 14, 1916, in the small town of Wharton, Texas. A fifth-generation Texan, Foote felt a strong

affinity for the land and the people in and around his hometown. He later created the imaginary towns of Harrison and Bountiful, modeling them closely after the characteristics and people of Wharton. Foote has written:

> From the beginning, most of my plays have taken place in the imaginary town of Harrison, Texas, and it seems to me a more unlikely subject could not be found in these days of Broadway and world theatre, than this attempt of mine to recreate a small Southern town and its people. But I did not choose this task, this place, or these people to write about so much as they chose me, and I try to write of them with honesty. ("Foote" 210)

Educated at the Pasadena Playhouse (1933-35) and the Tamara Darkarhovna Theatre School (1937-39), Horton Foote began his theatrical career as an actor, appearing in minor roles on Broadway through 1942. He operated Productions, Inc., in Washington, D.C., where he taught playwriting and acting and managed a semi-professional theatre. Like the majority of the new talent soon to enter television--writers, actors, directors--Foote first gained considerable experience in legitimate theatre.

Foote had written two stage plays before turning his attention to television: Only the Heart (1944) and The Chase (1952). His first television play, The Travelers, was produced on NBC in 1952. This was followed by The Trip to Bountiful, A Young Lady of Property, John Turner Davis, The Tears of My Sister, The Death of the Old Man, Expectant Relations, and The Midnight Caller, all produced in 1953 on either the Philco-Goodyear Playhouse or the Gulf

Playhouse. Foote's The Dancers and The Shadow of Willie Greer were produced by NBC in 1954; Flight by NBC in 1956; Members of the Family by CBS in 1957; The Shape of the River by CBS in 1960; and The Gambling Heart by NBC in 1964.

Foote has described a device he uses in the writing of his television plays:

> I keep a journal of each play's progress as I work, with the problems I feel need to be worked out, but when I finish the play, I can't bear to read or study any of these notes. Partly, I suppose it is because I will be reminded of many things I failed to do that my talent and technique were not ready to do. (Burack 148)

Apparently, Foote felt that his talent and technique were becoming well-suited for motion pictures. He wrote several screenplays, among them Storm Fear (United Artists, 1956), To Kill a Mockingbird (Universal, 1962),[1] The Chase (Columbia, 1965), Baby, the Rain Must Fall (Columbia, 1965),[2] Hurry, Sundown (Paramount, 1966), The Stalking Moon (Warner Brothers, 1968), and Tomorrow (Filmgroup, 1971).

In the preface to his anthology of eight television plays, entitled Harrison, Texas, Foote identifies several characteristics common to his plays: (1) they share the same general locale; (2) the central characters are almost always either very young or very old; (3) one of two common themes are explored in varying ways, "an acceptance of life or a preparation for death" (viii). The Trip to Bountiful is an excellent example of Foote's writing that

clearly demonstrates all three characteristics.

Foote's ability to depict the inner turmoil and deep motivations of common, ordinary people has led critic Henry Hewes to call him a "Texas Chekhov" ("Trips, Pleasant and Unpleasant" 49), a term especially appropriate to the rural-urban dichotomy expressed in The Trip to Bountiful. Sturcken sees Foote as the rural counterpart to Paddy Chayefsky, dealing with the middle-class citizens of the typical, small Southern town rather than the congested neighborhoods of the Bronx or Brooklyn (144). Foote's emphasis is always on character over plot; the characters are interesting, fully developed, and always human, while the plots are typically simple and often sentimental. NBC Playhouse producer Fred Coe explained in 1954: "If anyone else used one of Horton's plots, he would probably come out with a soap opera. But he writes with great craft and know-how, especially about problems of youth and old age ("Bright Galaxy").

Bus Ride to the Past

The problem of old age is evident in The Trip to Bountiful. Act One establishes the unhappiness of the elderly central character, Mrs. Carrie Watts, who, forced by economic necessities to live with her son and daughter-in-law in a cramped, two-room apartment in downtown Houston, longs for the day when she can return to the open air and the spacious farmhouse she grew up in years ago in the town of Bountiful. Making life more difficult for her is the daughter-in-law, Jessie Mae, a "denatured specimen of the humanity which the city produces" (Clurman). She is a

vain, selfish woman with an insatiable appetite for Coca-Colas, movie fan magazines, and beauty parlors, apparently paid for with Mrs. Watts' pension check, confiscated each month by Jessie Mae. The old lady conceals the check this month and proceeds to purchase a bus ticket to Bountiful to realize an old dream. Later, Jessie Mae and her husband, Ludie, "a failure who is torn between two loyalties" ("Trip to Bountiful" Newsweek), arrive at the bus depot, unsuccessful in their attempt to track down Mrs. Watts. The bus pulls away as Jessie Mae, angry and militant, shouts out her intention to call the police.

Act Two is an excellent example of skillful expository writing. The audience thus far is aware only of Jessie Mae's badgering personality and the awesome determination of Mrs. Watts to reach her goal. The conversation on the bus between Mrs. Watts and a young lady named Thelma provides the audience with the necessary understanding of why Bountiful is so important to the old lady. Edgar Willis praises this scene as a natural and motivated presentation of facts, facts essential to the understanding of the play:

> The conversation that takes place between the two is a completely natural one. Utter strangers are constantly meeting and talking in bus stations, and the fact that Thelma is a stranger means that she does not know what is going on. As she finds out what is happening, so does the eavesdropping audience. It is also completely natural for Mrs. Watts to pour out her heart to Thelma during the bus ride, for we often find it easier to talk to strangers about intimate matters than

> we do to close friends. By means of this scene Foote lets us know the intensity of Mrs. Watts' desire to return to Bountiful, a feeling we must understand to appreciate her desperate struggle to reach it. (145)

At the end of the act, Mrs. Watts has reached the town of Harrison, close to Bountiful. As she sits alone in the bus depot, hoping to get a ride in the morning to Bountiful, she learns from the sheriff that Ludie and Jessie Mae are on their way to retrieve her, and she experiences a fainting spell.

Marya Mannes said in 1954 that "television is the place for the poet, the master of mood and of word. It is the place for implication, for simplicity, even for silence." Implication and mood play a large role in Act Three, which opens on Mrs. Watts standing on the front porch of her dilapidated old home. She seems at peace, contented with the world and with herself. The brief visit "gives her back the sense of personal dignity which Jessie Mae had trampled upon" (Wyatt). Her happiness is interrupted, however, by the arrival of Ludie and Jessie Mae. Ripping up her pension check in front of her disbelieving daughter-in-law, Mrs. Watts seems to be renewed and invigorated, willing to return to Houston with her son, but equipped with her dignity and her strength: "I've had my trip. That's more than enough to keep me happy the rest of my life" (Foote 262). It is an emotional ending to a play which explores the theme of what happens to people who lose a sense of their roots in the transition to an industrialized, over-crowded society. Such a transition is especially difficult for the old, and for Mrs. Watts it is poignant and painful.

Richard Hayes states that "Mr. Foote conveys the sure, genuine emotion of his theme not by coldly parading disaster, but by permitting life slowly to accumulate until at the last--cleanly and with great strength--sympathy takes us prisoner."

Anatomy of a Coke Drinker

Horton Foote is a writer with a fine ability to delineate and express character. As such, it is not difficult to see why he would fit in well with the NBC Playhouse, whose philosophy was discussed in 1954 by its guiding force, producer Fred Coe: "The TV approach, as opposed to the theatre or movies or radio, is an approach to the understanding of character rather than to the complication of the story line" (30). Virtually all of the criticism concerning the television drama of Horton Foote makes mention of his outstanding knack for characterization. Jack Gould of the New York Times stated that Foote's The Old Beginning "easily ranks as one of his better works because he delved much more deeply into the motivation of his characters and came to grips with them as people." Another writer stated that "there is still no substitute for well-defined characterizations; fictional people should bring a story alive through their personalities, traits, and actions. Some television dramas observe this fundamental; others don't" ("Television in Review"). Foote's Expectant Relations, the same writer affirms, is a good example of one that does. And, regarding The Trip to Bountiful, Hewes has stated that the various events of the actual plot are not terribly exciting in themselves, but "most of the drama comes from the conflagrations that burn silently within the characters" ("Trips" 48).

The character of Jessie Mae Watts is a case in point: she is an excellent example of Foote's skill in careful, detailed, and consistent characterization. She is a character whom we feel we know as well as Chayefsky's Marty or Serling's Mountain McClintock, though we certainly like her less. Jessie Mae is, in the words of Wolcott Gibbs, "a ferocious summing up of all the idle, discontented, and empty-headed women--the Coke drinkers, double-feature addicts, and juke-box enthusiasts--who are so often alleged to make up most of the female population of the desolate South" (75).

Edgar Willis uses the character of Jessie Mae in his textbook analysis of repeating character qualities. Foote describes Jessie Mae briefly in his production directions to The Trip to Bountiful: she is an obviously vain woman who is hard, self-centered, and domineering (221). Her vanity is impressed upon us through a series of encounters that show the audience that she is addicted to the reading of movie magazines and that she even fancies that she might be successful in Hollywood. As Willis says, "the impression of her vanity is further developed by the revelation that she spends long hours in beauty parlors" (131). Her selfishness is portrayed again and again as the play progresses. She expects to be waited on hand and foot, a trait revealed in the opening scene when she asks Mrs. Watts to go into the kitchen and get her a coke. Later we learn that the old lady prepares all the meals in the house. Whatever concern Jessie Mae might have for her mother-in-law is shown to be motivated entirely by greed and selfishness. If anything happens to Mrs. Watts, it will immediately cut off the pension check. She seems afraid that Mrs. Watts may

die of excitement once she arrives in Bountiful, but this concern becomes transparent as she bemoans in the next breath the expense involved in bringing the body back to Houston. And, in the final confrontation between the two women in Bountiful, Jessie Mae's first action is to grab ferociously for the old woman's pension check.

Foote skillfully develops Jessie Mae in other related ways, and the overall portrait is that of a woman very difficult to like. Early in the play, she squelches Mrs. Watts' singing because, she claims, it gets on her nerves. To Thelma, a complete stranger at the bus depot, she describes Mrs. Watts as "crazy" and "spoiled rotten." Despite her husband's objections, she brings the police into the situation, hoping to teach the old woman a lesson. Although she is certainly aware of what Bountiful means to her mother-in-law, she delights in characterizing it right to her face as an ugly old swamp. At the end of the play, she even denies Mrs. Watts a few moments of solitude and peace on the porch of her crumbling home by honking the car horn rudely and impatiently. As Willis concludes from these carefully chosen situations and conversations:

> Jessie Mae does and says different things as the play progresses, but each action confirms over and over again her basic traits of selfishness and callous unconcern for other people's feelings. The range of the character is actually fairly limited, as it must be in a play that has to deal with one problem at a time, but the repeated revelation of these two basic traits gives an impression of character depth and richness. (132)

A Break with Tradition

The NBC Playhouse had a tradition of casting competent but relatively unknown stage actors into the roles of its television plays. Through moving performances in one or more of the better dramas produced by Coe, these actors began to make names for themselves, later broadening their careers into motion pictures. Actors and actresses like Joanne Woodward, Rod Steiger, Kim Stanley, and others were thrust from relative obscurity into national popularity through fine performances in live television drama (Coe 31). Big Hollywood names were avoided, for reasons discussed by Associate Producer Gordon Duff in an interview in April, 1953: "If you have an expensive Hollywood name, more people would tune in, but I'm not sure more people would like the show. A name's great, but we're not in the business to keep the press agent happy" ("Grownups' Playhouse").

The Trip to Bountiful represented a break with this tradition. The part of Mrs. Watts was played by Lillian Gish, 57 years old at the time. Her performance was hailed by many critics as one of the finest, if not the finest, of her entire dramatic career.[3] Foote dedicated the play to Ms. Gish, and it is so noted on the title page to the play as it appears in the anthology, Harrison, Texas.

A complete list of the cast of The Trip to Bountiful, presented on the Goodyear Television Playhouse at 9:00 PM, EST, on March 1, 1953, follows:

Mrs. Watts: Lillian Gish

Jessie Mae Watts: Eileen Heckart

Ludie Watts: John Beal

Thelma: Eva Marie Saint

Ticket Man (railroad station): Dennis Cross

Bus Driver: Charles Sladen

Ticket Man (bus station): Will Hare

Attendant: Larry Bolton

Sheriff: Frank Overton

Ticket Man (second bus station): William Hansen

The director of the production was Vincent Donehue. Fred Coe was producer and Gordon Duff was associate producer.

The Trip to Broadway

Horton Foote's The Trip to Bountiful is especially significant because it marked a reversal of the common trend during the earliest days of live television drama--the reliance on successful Broadway plays as material for television. Not only was The Trip to Bountiful an original play specifically written for television (a common practice by 1953), but it became the first television play ever produced on Broadway (Sturcken 143). Time magazine commented on this unusual situation soon after the play opened: "While seeming to throttle stage and screen with one hand, television is generously offering help with the other" ("Friend and Foe"). The stage play opened on November 3, 1953, at the Henry Miller Theatre, and enjoyed a run of about a month. The producer and director were unchanged from the television broadcast, and Ms. Gish continued in her role as Mrs. Watts. Ludie was played by Gene Lyons, and Jo Van Fleet (who would turn in a powerful performance two years later in East of Eden) replaced Eileen Heckart

as Jessie Mae. The play marked Eva Marie Saint's first appearance on Broadway, as she re-created the role of Thelma ("Trip to Bountiful" Theatre Arts). The reviews of the stage play were mixed, but the majority of negative comments seemed to concentrate more on acting and sets than on the situations or dialogue. Eric Bentley's criticism in the New Republic, however, did raise an interesting question regarding Foote's characterization of Ludie Watts: "The plot, the theme, the exigencies of theatre all demand that he speak, that he explain himself, but he is maddeningly and fatally silent, pleading some fifth amendment of the dramatic constitution." Critics were in general agreement, though, concerning the moving performances of Gish, Van Fleet, and Saint, and more than one expressed surprise and sadness at the fact that the play had such a brief run.

Unfolding the Human Spirit

The television writing of Horton Foote can best be described as the careful and sensitive exploration of the human mind and spirit. In The Trip to Bountiful he endeavors to portray that quality in all of us which spurs us on to an important goal, the attainment of which will satisfy an intense longing. In The Tears of My Sister, a short teleplay using the novel device of "camera-as-character,"[4] Foote tells the story of a young girl forced to marry a much older and unwanted man in order to provide for her mother and sister. A Young Lady of Property, in which Kim Stanley gave what was generally considered at the time to be the best television performance to date (Hewes "Six Authors"), is a poignant

vignette about a teen-age girl's dreams, loneliness, and growing pains in a small Southern town in 1925. Throughout his many other plays, dealing as they do with the young or with the old, we see always the craft of a fine writer coming to terms with the problems and anxieties that are a part of life. And because life is unpredictable and uncertain, so are Horton Foote's characters uncertain and anxious, responding in ways that resist prediction or even rational explanation. He has consistently eschewed a formulaic approach to his depiction of the human condition. Erik Barnouw's discussion of the decline of live anthology drama might explain the obsolescence of perceptive character studies in which Foote specialized:

> It was especially catastrophic for the future of the medium that the "anthology series" seemed in danger of disappearing. A series of this sort, exemplified by Philco-Goodyear Playhouse, invites writer contributions without specification of required character, locale, or formula. The play is the thing. It is cast according to its needs. . .Writers responded to the open invitation of these series in a way that gave television for some years the initiative among dramatic media and made it the mecca of young writers and a major source for other media. . .Now the door apparently was being closed on most of such activity. Instead came series that did not say to the writer, "Write us a play." They said, "Write us a vehicle for _____ _____ in the role of a private eye named _____ _____. Final act should have

> strong action sequence. Study our formula before making submissions. Submit outlines through recognized agents." (35-36)

In view of such confining demands, it is not difficult to see why a writer like Horton Foote, always more interested in character and theme than in plot or "strong action sequences," would gradually disappear from the television scene and turn his attention elsewhere. Like so many others of his time, he turned it toward Hollywood. On March 24, 1986, by awarding Geraldine Page an Oscar for Best Actress, Hollywood--and a watching world--turned its attention toward Horton Foote.

Notes

[1] Horton Foote received an Academy Award for the best screenplay based on material from another medium for To Kill a Mockingbird in 1962. He also received an award from the Writers Guild of America for the same screenplay.

[2] The screenplay for Baby, the Rain Must Fall was based upon Foote's own play entitled The Traveling Lady.

[3] See John Mason Brown's article, "The Trip to Bountiful," in Saturday Review 12 Dec. 1953: 46-47. See also E. V. Wyatt, "The Trip to Bountiful," in The Catholic World Jan. 1954: 308.

[4] With this technique, the central character is never seen by the audience. All of the action of the play is seen through the eyes of this character, who becomes, in essence, the camera. Other characters speak directly to this person by addressing the camera, and the audience hears the voice only as this person replies. Also, the thoughts of this central character are heard by the audience while the other characters, of course, are oblivious to them. Foote was not the first to use this device. Rod Steiger was the camera's voice for the first time in a play by Robert Alan Aurthur entitled Cafe Society. See Variety 18 July 1953: 35.

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